Interviews

Darrell Ang and Karen Mushegain
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The multi-awarded Singaporean conductor, Darrell Ang, is in Manila again for yet another one-night-only engagement, following his successful *Mostly Mozart* concert in the country with the Manila Symphony Orchestra last year. He conducts the MSO on August 15 at the Meralco Theater for the Philippine premiere of Gioacchino Rossini's opera, *La Cenerentola*.

This exclusive interview with the maestro revisits his conducting style, artistic vision, and current and future commitments as one of the most sought-after young Asian conductors today. The American mezzo-soprano, Karin Mushegain, whose performances abroad as Cenerentola have been captivating audiences, joins Ang to enlighten us about the vocal demands of this masterpiece by Rossini.

Allan Pastrana (AP): You were here last year for the *Mostly Mozart* concert with the Manila Symphony Orchestra. How did you find the experience?

Darrell Ang (DA): I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I really enjoyed working with the musicians in the orchestra. I found they were not just amiable, but at the same time they worked very hard. And they were willing to give everything that I asked. I felt they worked very hard to produce sudden, really ridiculous demands from me. But they did very well. I was very satisfied. In fact, I was more than satisfied; I was overjoyed and I just couldn't wait to come back. I was really looking forward to coming back and working with the MSO again.

AP: Did your schedule even allow for leisure the last time you were here?

DA: Well, I mean, if we have to sit in the car for two hours between one place and another . . . . No, it's just not possible.

AP: We talked about your Leningrad schooling and the Musin tradition, but can you elaborate on your own creative process as a conductor? How would a typical rehearsal begin? Do you have any weird rituals before a performance that laymen normally expect from classical musicians?

DA: I don't know what the layman expects from classical musicians. . . . No, I don't have any specific rituals. In fact, I'm probably a very boring classical artist. No quirks. I do take my work very seriously. I mean, I try to make sure that I'm very prepared. Sometimes, you know, given my schedule, it's hard to be very prepared but I try to be.

When I was a little less experienced—well, I'm not that experienced now—I had a funny ritual in which I would have to always eat a Mars bar before I went on stage, sometimes even a can of Coke. I needed the sugar high. But that was silly because over time I realized it's just psychological. It took me a while because I guess I had nerves when I was younger.

When you do this so many times—day in, day out—you don't feel nervous anymore. In fact, "nervous" is not the word; it's really just performance anxiety. You don't know how it's going to go but you're trying to tell yourself, or remind yourself of various details that need to happen, that you need to do in order for things to happen on stage. But I don't have that anymore.

Actually, I very much rely on things that happen at the spur of the moment in performance because I do everything that I have to do in rehearsal. I make sure that everything is done at rehearsal. And then once it's time for the concert, I leave that all behind. Things have to be recreated at that point in time. Of course I don't mean I, all of a sudden, take crazy tempos. No. But I always leave a little bit of space for sparks to fly.

AP: An article about conductors for BBC Culture recounted an incident involving Wilhelm Furtwängler walking out of a Toscanini performance, saying "That man is just a time-beater." In your experience, when does a conductor start being more than "just a time-beater"?

DA: I mean, this is purely objective. There are some music in which you would have to be strict with the time. Of course phrasing is one thing, and phrase endings, etc. but nevertheless you cannot be too free with the music of Mozart, with the music of Haydn or Beethoven. There's got to be a certain sense of rigor to that kind of music. Even Brahms. I guess a conductor starts less to become a time-beater when he actually really knows the music, and he knows how he wants it to sound. Because when you know how—it's like speaking—you want to phrase a sentence, there's no way it can actually be square. So when you really know the music, feel the music deep within you, I think that's when you start to realize where and when you can take a little bit of liberty.

AP: Do you have favorite conductors? Can you name a few and share with us the reason why you like them?

DA: They're all dead though. Most of them are dead—Karajan, Carlos Kleiber, Claudio Abbado. There are so many people that I like because there's so much to learn from every one of them. Even Leonard Bernstein. I mean, he was my hero when I was a child. Much less now, although he still inspires me. There are conductors living now that I really look up to . . . like, Mutti has always been one of my favorites. James Levine I really love. (*To Karin*) Have you worked with James Levine?

Karin Mushegain (KM): No, I never worked with him.

DA: He's a great conductor.

AP: I'm sure.

DA: Who else? Sometimes I like the work of Barenboim, for example, sometimes I don't. Sometimes the same goes for people like Rattle. I mean the people who are living now . . . it's a different world. And it's a different age of conductors, when conductors become more like politicians, statesmen. I don't mean you have to be an authoritative figure—not at all. But then the role of the conductor nowadays is also very different from before, and the way they make music. The orchestras that they work with are very different from the old orchestras. Nowadays, it's hard for me to find everything in any one conductor. But before, you could because they were so unique. Their personalities were so unique. From now on, you cannot find somebody like Karajan; that kind of person cannot exist anymore.

AP: Does it have something to do with the personality?

DA: Yes, it's the personality but it comes with the times.

AP: But would you consider, for example, someone like Dudamel? Does he have it?

DA: Yes, of course, he has a lot of personality. A lot of it is from the hype that surrounds him though and the hype that surrounds El Sistema . . .

AP: But don't worry; I'm not really a fan.

DA: No, I am a fan of Dudamel! I really respect his work. He's so talented. I really admire him but I'm just being very objective here. When you look at conductors of the past and conductors of today, there is such a huge difference. I mean, I would say people like Furtwängler—these old conductors that I really admired, the Germans—Hans Knappertsbusch, Karl Böhm, these conductors wouldn't get jobs nowadays because of the way they are, because of the kind of style and music that they represented.

Nowadays you need people like Dudamel, you need people like Andris Nelsons, the young firebrands who dance on the podium, who do a lot more than what a conductor actually has to do . . .

KM: They perform.

AP: Yeah, they perform.

DA: It's more than music nowadays. So it's a very different world. It's so hard to really pinpoint what makes a good conductor nowadays.

AP: How busy have you been since the last time you were here?

DA: I'm always busy.

AP: You once said you're planning to take a sabbatical between 2015 and 2016 to focus on composition . . .

DA: True.

AP: Are you still considering that option?

DA: I'm still doing that. My sabbatical is not the same as somebody else's sabbatical. When I say sabbatical, I'm still working. Maybe I'm working a little bit less. So for example, normally I would have every week covered. I'm conducting back to back, more or less, every week. I'm in a different city or I have a different program. But between 2015 and 2016, I would say, I'm not doing that every week. Sometimes I'm doing three weeks out of four, or two weeks out of four. But that's like the minimum because unfortunately I still need to make a living.

AP: Tell us more about your recording projects with Naxos. You did the Meyerbeer overtures and entr'actes album with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra last year.

DA: I have a Zhou Long. That one is very good. The music is very good.

AP: Yeah, the Zhou Long, I also saw that. Is the one with Barcelona Symphony Orchestra still part of the Naxos project?

DA: Yes it is. It was just made. It was a disc of Spanish violin concertos. In September, October, then next year again in March and April . . . I'm doing several more projects with them. Mostly French music and Asian composers.

AP: Karin, what do you think of Rossini's operas from a singer's point of view?

KM: I think his music is exciting and brilliant. For me it's so much fun to sing. I specialize in coloratura; I would rather sing that all day long than legato. For some singers it's overwhelming to have to sing the coloratura, but I feel like the fireworks is what makes his music so enticing, especially to an audience. For someone who's never heard opera, they are so excited when they hear Rossini. And it's clever, and it's playful, which you don't always

get in opera. And there is like a sweetness to it which you also don't get a lot of. You get a lot of romance and drama, but not much sweetness.

And *Cenerentola* is, in my opinion, a masterpiece, especially for the singers. He warms us up. In *Barbiere*, every singer starts with their arias so they come out full on, but in this everyone gets a little something to warm up before they get their pieces. So literally I don't even have to, if I didn't want to, warm up for the show because Rossini does it for me. I have my little arietta, and then the duets, and then the quintet . . . and so it builds up. I think it's one of his few operas that actually builds up as opposed to just starting with the showstoppers. And I think that's why it's a really special piece. And all of the characters, voices—even though we all have patter—you can tell who are the comedic characters and who are the ingénues. All the personalities are very clear in the music.

AP: Darrell, what about you? What do you think of Rossini's operas from a conductor's point of view?

DA: I love Rossini. I think he's one of the most ideal operatic composers. In fact, my taste with opera veers towards that kind of thing. So, I love Mozart, for example. Mozart is my favorite operatic composer, my favorite composer overall. And in Rossini I find a composer that shares some similarities with Mozart. But at the same time, Rossini is so difficult to perform because the style is so unique. And it's a style that you don't find anywhere else. Rossini is on his own.

KM: We have to be so in sync because of the give and take of this. I mean there are moments when it has to be. But that is what's so difficult about it, that you are constantly going in flux between the very rhythmic and then the give.

DA: Exactly.

AP: And there's a lot of stretti here . . .

DA: Always.

It's hard to actually judge and to find a balance, so the conductor needs to really have the sound in his head of how he wants this Rossini orchestra to sound like before he actually goes into the pit. For me personally, and this is something that probably might change as I get older, it is a style that is in between Mozart, Donizetti, you know. . . . It's got to be light but then it cannot be "fluffy" in a way that Offenbach is sometimes. That's a very different style. And at the same time you got some conductors who conduct Rossini as if it was like early Verdi, which it actually sometimes sounds like. If it becomes either one of these extremes, it's also not Rossini. Rossini has to be somewhere in the middle. And that

balance is so hard to strike. I mean Rossini demands for such strictness in rhythm, but at the same time there's got to be a lot of flexibility depending on the dramatic requirements, depending on the singers. There is this famous Rossini crescendo that everybody knows in which it gets louder, and it gets faster. And you need to allow for that to happen naturally. So the conductor needs to let a lot of freedom in, a lot of the time, and let the singers lead the pulse, because if he tries to hold on to the reins too tightly the music doesn't lift.

Finding a balance to conduct Rossini is really hard. Rossini is one of the hardest, I think, of composers to conduct simply because the demands that he puts—first of all, on the virtuosity of the singers, as well as the virtuosity of the orchestra—are very high. But at the same time, in order to be musical, and in order to be Rossinian, the requirements of Rossini to be flexible and to be at the same time with taste is very difficult to actually judge.

AP: Karin, do you think they pose specific technical and artistic challenges compared to other composers' operas? You did other operas like *Hansel and Gretl* . . .

KM: And I sing tons of Mozart, too . . .

AP: Yes, Mozart too . . . Do you encounter very specific artistic challenges when it comes to Rossini?

KM: For me, it's probably where I feel more comfortable so I wouldn't call them challenges but more like pleasures. I think what people may not know is that when you're singing coloratura, it's like following a roadmap. You have to make sure you know where you're going at all times so you don't get lost, which never happens in other operas. In other operas, you're just singing the notes on the pages, and normally there are only four notes to a measure, max. But in this one, there could be like twenty. So it's all about knowing where you're going, and having a plan, but then also finding that phrasing and the musicality. So it sounds like each coloratura phrase is meaningful and applies to that moment and to the emotion, and to the mood, and it doesn't sound like a vocal exercise.

So I think that's one of the challenges for opera singers. That's a challenge but a beautiful challenge to have. One of the nice things about it is you can sort of relax into coloratura singing. You don't have to sing with one hundred percent of your voice. And sometimes it's nicer when you don't because then the coloratura flows easier. And it sounds more even, but you still have the strength and energy behind it which I love. You can play a lot more with the tone and with the feeling, and the mood

of it. So I think it's also just about pacing too. All of the numbers are long, and they all have different focal points.

AP: Darrell, you recently conducted *La Cenerentola* at the Opéra de Rennes. That's staged, right?

DA: Yes, that was staged. That was an old, Opéra de Paris staging.

AP: How do you feel about conducting a complete opera in concert format?

DA: I don't know. I've never done it. I'll tell you after the show.

AP: You are doing the Rossini opera here in concert form. Are there other reasons why this production opted for an un-staged production?

KM: I'm assuming it's budget constraints.

AP: Does it pose any problems different from what we might already expect from a staged version? It could be interesting as well. Recently, I saw the Da Ponte /Mozart trilogy on cable, Harnoncourt conducting, at the Theater an der Wien.

DA: No, I wouldn't say problems. Maybe the challenge would be to make it sound exciting.

KM: And also, for not having the contact with the conductor . . . I feel like in Rossini I make eye contact with the conductor more than in any other composer because for constantly having to be in sync, in a way that's so different. . . . There has to be movement.

DA: Yes, there has to be movement. It's not like *Otello*, Verdi, you can do it in concert form, and it still works . . . I think we can still use the stage. We can move about.

KM: As long as the intent is there, and the interaction is there, that's the most important part of any performance—even in a staged performance.

AP: I don't think you need to have a lot of props.

KM: No, sometimes it's nice, sometimes it's distracting when you have too many props or a terrible set. You have an amazing singer there and all you could see is the terrible set. It's distracting sometimes. It takes away from the music and the performance.

AP: Are you familiar with the modernist approaches used in a lot of the operas in, let's say, the collections of Arthaus Musik? Aren't you into that stuff?

KM: Oh no, I'm not anti that at all. I love exploring all the different ways of telling the story. But I think the most important thing is to tell the story. And I think lots of times they get caught up on, "Oh, I need a set, I need a prop . . . they ask for a cup, Oh, I need a cup!" But I don't think you actually need a cup; I think you just need to have the intent of a cup being there. I think that gets lost a lot of the time. I love new versions.

AP: Personally, do you like this opera? The arias, the ensembles, the dramatic possibilities? Or do you prefer some other Rossini opera?
KM: I love *Cenerentola*!
AP: But is it your favorite?
DA: (*To Karin*) No, you said you liked *Barbiere* better.
KM: I like Rosina because she's feisty but I love singing *Cenerentola*. But I try to add some spice to her. I try to give her some backbone. It's just so hard. I love them both.
AP: How about you, Darrell?
DA: It's hard for me to choose because like a father, you love all your children. You can't really say you like one over the other. I mean, I'll say it's a toss between this and *Il Vaggio a Reims* because I love that opera, too. And that is crazy! That one is even more difficult than this one. I love *Barbiere*, for example, but it's not as fun to conduct as *Cenerentola*. Maybe for the singers it's more fun to sing.
KM: I think *Cenerentola* is more fun to sing. I like the ensembles more.
DA: Yes, the ensembles are amazing. Very inspiring. I'm the type of conductor that is very absorbed with anything at the moment. I mean, I don't like Tchaikovsky outside of conducting Tchaikovsky. But when I'm conducting Tchaikovsky, he is my favorite composer. But if I'm not conducting Tchaikovsky, I don't really want to listen to him.

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